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Indian and Islamic philosophy

1) India.

Indian philosophy is traditionally divided into four periods: 1) the Vedic period; 2) the classical (or Brahmin-Buddhist) period, lasting from the 6th century B.C. to the 10th century A.D. approximately; 3) the post-classical or Hinduistic period, from the 10th to the 18th centuries; and 4) the modern period, from the British conquest to the present day.

Oriental philosophy was always closely bound up with religion, starting with Hinduism itself. Hinduism is a system of religious ideas and concepts which has persisted in most of the Indian Subcontinent from the early Middle Ages till the present day, although it includes elements that come from a very remote past. Thus Shivaism has pre-Vedic roots and is related to the idea of Shiva, the lord of fettered animals. In its modern form, however, it arose from the general social and ideological crisis in India in the 6th-4th centuries B.C. In the Hinduistic period, the Vishnu and Shiva systems were developed. It was stated that the Brahman of the Upanishads is the god Shiva, Siva or Vishnu. In his great

History of Philosophy, Hegel writes: "Indian culture is developed to a high degree, and it is imposing, but its philosophy is identical with its Religion, and the objects to which attention is devoted in Philosophy are the same as those which we find brought forward in Religion. Hence the holy books or Vedas also form the general groundwork for Philosophy." (G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 126.)

In Hinduism, certain dialectical elements can be found in embryo, such as the idea of the three phases of creation (Brahma), maintenance of order (Vishnu) and destruction or disorder (Shiva). Ian

Stewart, who has written on Chaos Theory, points out that the difference between the gods Shiva, "the Untamed", and Vishnu is not the antagonism between good and evil, but that the real principles of harmony and discord together underline the whole of existence. "In the same way," he writes, "mathematicians are beginning to view order and chaos as two distinct manifestations of an underlying determinism. And neither exists in isolation. The typical system can exist in a variety of states, some ordered, some chaotic. Instead of two opposed polarities, there is a continuous spectrum. As harmony and discord combine in musical beauty, so order and

chaos combine in mathematical beauty." (Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice?* p. 22.)

Hegel was not entirely fair to Indian philosophy, since he ignored the non-Vedic materialist strain in Indian philosophy, with his customary prejudice towards materialism in general. However, it is true that the genesis of Indian philosophy is to be found in the oldest of the Indian writings, the Vedas.

Under the impact of Islam, several other monotheistic religions arose in the 10th century, notably Sikhism as an attempt to reconcile Hinduism with Islam.

Hinduism is characterised by an extreme proliferation -almost an over-production- of gods. At one time, the number of gods and goddesses in India (330 million) outstripped the current total population. But from the earliest times we also find the opposite tendency: a tendency in the direction of materialism and atheism.

Indian philosophy arose on the basis of one of the oldest of human civilisations, a line of cultural development which far pre-dates the culture of Western Europe. The Indian cultural traditions has its roots as far back as the 10th-15th centuries B.C. and extends in a virtually unbroken thread down to the present day,

showing considerable vitality and exuberance. The original source for all Indian philosophy is the ancient body of oral literature known as the Vedas, the most famous of which is the Rig-Veda. These contain, in addition to hymns to nature-gods and details of rituals, other material of a clearly philosophical character. As early as 1500 B.C. the Rig-Veda asks the question: Where does the universe come from? Likewise, the opening verse of one of the Upanishads asks: "Propelled by what does a directed mind fall upon its object? By whom was life first set in motion? Urged by whom are *these* words being spoken? Which god harnesses the eyes and ears?"

The Vedas

The very earliest Indian religious writings, the Vedas, date from about 1500 B.C. and therefore may be considered as the oldest philosophical literature in the world. In a formal sense, the Vedas are hymns to the gods, but, as Hegel also points out Oriental religions are more philosophical in character than Western Christianity. The gods have less of a personal character and are more akin to general concepts and symbols. We even find the elements of dialectics in Hinduism, and above all in Buddhism, as Engels has explained. The gods and goddesses of the Vedas are not persons but manifestations of ultimate truth and

reality, and these writings contain a wealth of philosophical and religious speculation about the nature of the universe. The Vedas already contain the germ of a philosophical idea -namely, the concept of a single world order (Ritam). The principle of order, right and justice is thus built into the fabric of the universe itself. There is also a unity of opposites (the particular and the universal) in the unity of Brahman, the world-soul, and Atman, the individual soul; the immortality of the soul which is re-incarnated in accordance with karma or the law of retribution. By doing what is right a man can escape from the eternal treadmill of reincarnation.

The Upanishads, which are ancient commentaries on the Vedas, constitute a further body of Indian philosophical literature, investing the Vedic gods and rites with new philosophical content. The earliest of these texts date from between 10th and 6th centuries B.C. They have had a tremendous effect not only on Indian thinking but also for social life for thousands of years. The Indian caste system, with its elaborate system of rules governing what members of each caste may or may not do, is presented by the Upanishads as an immutable product of the order of the universe. In this scheme of things, Brahma is the creative principle that underlies everything. From this universal

principle, everything is born, and returns to after death. Belief in reincarnation is reaffirmed and provides the basis for man's moral conduct. The notion of retribution (*karma*) maintained, for example, that a slanderer would be re-born with bad breath! In order to escape from this cycle, man must devote himself to contemplation of the unity of the soul (*atman*) with *brahma*.

The mystical and idealist nature of this does not require any comment. However, a reading of the Upanishads shows that they contain a series of arguments intended as a rebuttal of materialist and atheist ideas, which were present from the very dawn of Indian philosophy. In

his book *Man, God and Religion*, the modern Indian materialist Geetesh Sharma (himself a former Hindu priest) gives several examples of this:

"In some of the 'suktas' of the Vedas, there is evidence of opposition to the 'Yagnas' [fire worship] and rituals conducted by the priests.

"In the age of the Upanishads, this criticism of the priests becomes all the more sharp. In chhandogya Upanishad, the procession of the priests has been compared to a procession of dogs. In Mundak Upanishad the ritual of human sacrifice and other rites have been severely criticised.

"In the 18 dominant Upanishads there is one Shvasan Veda Upanishad. This Upanishad basically consists of materialist and naturalist teachings. In one section, it is written: 'neither is there any avatar, nor is there any God; neither a heaven nor a hell. All this traditional religious literature is a conception of self-conceited fools'. " (G. Sharma, *Man, God and Religion*, p. 37.)

The Carvakas

There were always those who denied the authority of the Vedas and the life of the soul after death. The earliest Indian materialists, like their Greek counterparts, regarded the elements

(water, fire, air) or else time or space, as the primary substance of the universe. The earliest information of this materialist doctrine is to be found in the Vedas and in the Sanskrit epics. The name, Lokayata, means "the view held by the common people", "the system which has its base in the common, profane world", "the art of sophistry", and also "the philosophy that denies that there is any world other than this one". Tradition attributes the Lokayata doctrine to a sage called Brihaspati, who, along with another figure called Charvaka (or Charvak), were the most outstanding proponents of the materialist doctrine. Since nothing is known about them, many have thought them to be

mythical personages. But then, very little is known about the early Greek philosophers either, yet we usually accept them as historical figures.

Carvaka rejected the notion of an afterworld, the authority of the sacred scriptures, the Vedas, and the immortality of the self. All such non-material objects as "afterlife", "destiny", or "soul" do not exist. Consciousness thus is viewed as a product of the material structure of the body and characterises the body itself -rather than a soul- and perishes with the body. The Lokayata doctrine conceived of the universe as being formed of the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. In

some texts, a fifth element (the ether) is added. These elements, in turn, were said to be composed of atoms, indivisible units which were conceived as immutable, indestructible and having existed for all time. The properties of any given object were determined by the atoms that comprised it. Likewise, consciousness and the senses were the result of a particular combination of atoms and the proportions in which they were combined. After the death of an organism, this combination disintegrated into elements that then combined with corresponding types of atoms in inanimate nature.

This early Indian materialism, for its

incompleteness and naïve elements, contains the germs of a profound idea and represents a brilliant anticipation of modern atomic science, in the same way as the philosophy of Democritus, Leukippus and Epicurus in ancient Greece. Moreover, in some ways it anticipated the modern theory of evolution. Some of the texts describe how certain elements originate from others, with the earth as the primordial source of all development. In the field of epistemology (the theory of knowledge) the doctrine of Lokayata is sensory, that is to say, it states that all human knowledge is derived from the senses (sense-perception). The sense-organs can only apprehend objects because they

themselves are composed of the same elements. Like is known to like. Therefore it denied the possibility of any indirect knowledge. Inference and conclusion were regarded as false instruments of cognition. Of the recognised means of knowledge (pramana), the Carvaka recognised only direct perception (anubhava). "Seeing is the source of all evidence," Brihaspati is supposed to have said.

This shows the negative side of early Indian materialism, which tended towards a narrow sensualism. But this is a defect which it shares with all materialism before Marx. The same narrowness can be seen in, say, the

English empirical materialism of Bacon, Locke and Hobbes who nevertheless represented a giant step forward in relation to the idealism and religious obscurantism of the Middle Ages and laid the base for the whole development of modern science. What is astonishing about this early materialism is not its limitations but its extraordinary insight and profundity.

In striking contrast to the mysticism and asceticism of the prevailing religion, the Indian materialists denied the existence of god, the soul and the idea of retribution ("Karma"). This school was alone in the whole gamut of Indian thought that rejected the transmigration

of souls. instead, the predominant feature of Lokayata was a healthy and cheerful hedonism. Against the perspective of a never-ending cycle of life and death with the prospect of an eventual spiritual liberation, Carvaka ethics urged each individual to seek his or her pleasure here and now. "As long as you live, live life to the fullest," said Charvaka. "After death, the body is turned to ashes. There is no re-birth." These words, so full of love for humanity and life, are strikingly reminiscent of the life-enhancing philosophy of Epicurus.

With great courage, and also with a lively sense of humour, the Carvaka materialists mocked religious

ceremonies, saying that they were invented by the Brahmans (the priestly caste) to ensure their livelihood. When the Brahmans defended animal sacrifices by claiming that the sacrificed beast goes straight to heaven, the members of the Carvaka asked why the Brahmans did not kill their aged parents to speed them on their way to heaven!

Of other early Indian materialists, Geetesh Sharma writes: "Kapil's 'sankhya-philosophy' is basically atheistic. Buddha and Mahavir did not believe in the concept of God yet Mahavir was more spiritualist. Buddha conceived of a religion that had the absence of a Godly concept and was

rather based on humanistic principles, logically formulated, illustrating the basic human values of life. He wanted to bring about the emancipation of suffering humanity and therefore based the fundamental principles of his religion on those values, while still being an atheist.

"Madhavacharya, in his works, has elaborated on the theory of materialist philosophers who believed only in the present existing world. They did not believe in the theory of divine creation of the universe by a supernatural power. According to them, if there is a benevolent God supervising humanity, then why is it that a majority of the human population is in the throes of

misery and suffering? If there is a just God above us, then why is there so much injustice on the earth, against the poor and deprived sections of society?

"Saint Brihaspati, pioneer of materialism, during the age of the Rig Veda, believed that fire worship, ritualism, practising the Vedas, smearing ashes all over the body, etc., were antics performed by those who considered themselves powerful and learned (...) Dhishan, the disciple of Brihaspati, considers the composers of the Vedic texts a group of confidence-tricksters. The Vedic thinker Permeshtin considered matter as the complete truth. According to him, it is the only source of

ideal knowledge." (G. Sharma, *Man, God and Religion*, pp. 36-7.)

Unfortunately, little is known about the details of this philosophy. Owing to the fierce opposition of the Vedic establishment, not a single document has come down to us, and we are obliged to learn about the ideas of these heroes from the writings of their enemies, particularly the philosophical treatises and compendia (darsana) written by the Vedic opponents of Lokayata between the 9th and 16th centuries. Ultimately, the supporters of materialism were fighting a lost battle. The triumph of the Vedas and Upanishads was consolidated in the classical period. But even then

there was always a strand of unorthodox thinking that challenged the Vedic authority upheld by the orthodox Mimamsa, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaiseshika and Vedanta schools. Apart from the consistently atheist and materialist schools of Charkvakas and Lokayata, there were also non-orthodox movements such as the Buddhist and Jainist schools.

All anti-Vedic schools, and even some Vedic schools such as Samkhya and Mimamsa, were atheistic. The existence of god was a standard topic for rational debate. In the 11th century Udayana, in his *Flower Offerings of Arguments*, set forth five ways of proving the existence

of god. The atheists put forward excellent rejoinders, like the following: "If the universe requires a maker because it undergoes change, even God needs a maker because he sometimes creates, sometimes destroys."

Buddhism and dialectics

The period of the 6th century B.C. in India was a turbulent one. The primitive communal system was collapsing and being replaced by class society, the cleavage of society into rich and poor and the rise of an oppressive state. Such periods in human history are inevitably characterised by a crisis of ideology, and the birth of new schools of

philosophy, politics and religion. Siddhartha Gotama, known to his followers as the Buddha (the Enlightened One) was the founder of just such a radical school of thought that developed as a reaction to the ossified form of the old Vedic philosophy

Born about 563 B.C., the son of a nobleman, Siddhartha is typical of the type of person who breaks away from the upper class and begins to reflect the protests and aspirations of the common people in a revolutionary period. Until he was 29 years old, he lived the sheltered life of a typical prince, with every luxury he could desire. According to legend, he saw a vision (the "Four

Signs") which jolted him out of his complacency. He saw in rapid succession a very feeble old man, a hideous leper, a funeral, and a venerable ascetic monk. He began to think about old age, disease, and death, and decided to follow the way of the monk. For six years he led an ascetic life of renunciation, but finally, while meditating under a tree, he concluded that the solution was not withdrawal from the world, but rather a practical life of compassion for suffering humanity.

Buddhism is often thought to be a religion, and indeed over the centuries it has adopted the outward appearance of a

religion. This is ironic, because the Buddha himself was opposed to religion. He rejected the authority of the Vedas and refused to set up any alternative creed. The old Brahman religion, with its rigid division of society into castes, its complicated rites and sacrifices to the gods, was becoming widely discredited. By contrast, Siddhartha's doctrine was direct and simple and eagerly accepted by the masses. He considered religious ceremonies as a waste of time and theological beliefs as mere superstition. In place of religious beliefs and religious ceremonies, the Buddha advocated a life devoted to universal compassion and brotherhood.

He taught that it was possible to gain liberation from suffering, not by changing society or fighting to dominate nature, but by withdrawing from life, seeking to gain moral perfection and submerging oneself in nirvana. Through such a life one might reach the ultimate goal, Nirvana, a state in which all living things are free from pain and sorrow. It is generally supposed that because Nirvana can be reached by meditation, Buddhism teaches a withdrawal from the real world. But this is debatable. A Buddhist might reply that the goal of Nirvana is not to be sought for oneself alone. It is regarded as a unity of the individual self with the universal self in which all things take part. Through

living a life of compassion and love for all, a person achieves the liberation from selfish cravings sought by the ascetic and a serenity and satisfaction that are more fulfilling than anything obtained by indulgence in pleasure until everything that exists in the universe has attained Nirvana.

However, leaving aside the accusation that Buddhism involves a passive element, whereby men and women learn to accept their lot instead of struggling actively to change it, Buddhism, in its origins, undoubtedly contained an important critical and revolutionary element. Buddha denied the existence of god as the creator of the world. He

rejected the teachings of the Vedas. He accepted the old idea of the cycle of births and deaths (samsara) and retribution (karma), but here it has a different sense. It meant that reincarnation depended, not on a man's caste, or on what rituals and sacrifices he performed, but only on his good or bad actions. In the realm of ethics, Buddhism advocated a morality based on selflessness and compassion for suffering humanity. The Buddha told his followers to think for themselves and take responsibility for their own future. The revolutionary implications of this idea, and its appeal to the masses at this time, is self-evident.

The new doctrine was argued in a highly consistent and logical way in the 2nd century A.D. by Nagarjuna, whose rationalism became the basis for the development of Buddhist logic. In common with the great idealist thinkers of the West, Nagarjuna, in defence of a false idealist theory (here carried to the extreme of a denial of the reality of the world) nevertheless pushed the development of logic and dialectics forward. The logic of Buddhism was later developed by other notable thinkers such as Dignaga and Dharmakirti (500-700 A.D.). This laid the basis for later idealist schools such as Madhyamaka, Vijnanavada, Tantric Buddhism and Zen Buddhism.

However, the character of the new movement gradually changed. In the first period (the 3rd century to the 1st century B.C.) the Buddha's idea of salvation was based on the idea that the world and human personality constitute a stream of elements of matter and consciousness (the dharmas) which constantly replaced each other. The road to salvation lay in not disturbing the dharmas. But in the early centuries A.D. Buddhism was transformed. Before this Buddha was only a revered teacher. Now he became deified, and salvation had to be sought through the favour of the deity, by the constant repetition of the sacred sutras (scriptures). In this way, Buddhism was turned into its opposite. This new

version of Buddhism (Mahayana) was radically different from the original version (Hinayana) taught by the Buddha himself. The latter taught that the material and psychical dharmas were real, whereas the doctrine of Mahayana maintains, not only the dharmas, but the whole world, is unreal.

Throughout the history of Indian philosophy there was always a struggle between materialism and idealism. Both Buddhist and Brahman writers denounced materialist philosophies like that of Samakara, the most outstanding Vedanta philosopher. They waged a fierce struggle against the materialist ideas of this school and also the

empiricism of the Nyaya and Vaiseshika schools. Even within Buddhism itself there was a struggle between trends that leaned towards materialism or idealism, such as the struggle between the idealist Madhyamika and yogacara schools against the materialist doctrine of the Theravidins and the Sarvastivadins. Through such bitter internal strife and debate, philosophy develops and grows, creating the necessary tools in the form of logic, which experienced a certain development at the hands of such Buddhist philosophers as Dignaga and Dharmakirti.

However, towards the end of the classical period, Hinduism was fighting

back. Janaism, that other great opposition trend in the religious world of the Indian Subcontinent, with its strict insistence on non-violence and respect for all life, was losing ground. And finally Buddhism itself, despite all its brilliant successes, was virtually ousted from India. The Buddha lived and taught in India, and so Buddhism is generally considered an Indian ethical philosophy. Yet, Buddhism did not sink deep roots in the land of its origin. Instead, it spread in different forms south into Sri Lanka and South-east Asia, and north through Tibet to China, Korea, and Japan. In the process, Buddhism suffered the same fate as the Vedic philosophy against which it had rebelled: it became a

religion, often rigid, with its own sects, ceremonies, and superstitions -an ironic fate, if one considers the original views of its founder.

The dynamic element in Buddhism, its dialectical side, is shown by its view of reality as something eternally changing and impermanent. By contrast, for the Vedanta philosophy, only the changeless and eternal is real. Modern Buddhist thinkers tend to lay more stress on its "rationalistic" and "atheistic" character with the aim of making it more acceptable to educated westerners in search of a satisfying alternative to Christianity that is dying on its feet. But although it is true that Buddhism in its

original form possesses a rational core, and that some of the elements of dialectics were present in it, they were present only in an extremely primitive and undeveloped form, as in Heraclitus and the early Greek philosophers. This represented the first faltering steps of dialectical philosophy, like the first steps of a child that is learning to walk. It is true that childhood has a charm all of its own, and all of us at times dream of returning to it. But to propose to go back to an earlier, undeveloped and embryonic form, when we possess the fully developed, wide-ranging and profound philosophy of dialectical materialism, is like proposing to a grown man or woman that they should

revert to childhood. The real development of dialectics can be found only in the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism.

Decay of Indian philosophy

The advent of colonialism had the effect of throwing back the development of Indian philosophy. On the whole, the progress of philosophy in the 18th and 19th centuries was not noteworthy, and lagged behind the development of social and political awareness, linked to the national awakening and the commencement of the struggle for national liberation. The dominant influence in the newly founded

universities was, naturally, the empiricist, utilitarian, and agnostic philosophies imported from England, along with other shoddy products of Victorian Britain. The Indian intellectual was fed on the thin gruel of John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and Herbert Spencer in order to addle their brains and ensure they did not read more subversive material. There were reactions against, usually of a conservative-mystical character like the Brahmo (Brahma) Samaj movement founded by Rammohan Ray and, toward the later decades of the century, the great saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Calcutta. This reflected mere impotence in the face of Western domination,

nothing more. Others played with Kant and Hegel, but without any substantial result. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore made noises that sometimes sounded vaguely philosophical, but the degenerate Indian bourgeoisie was no more capable of producing independent thought than it was of leading a fight for genuine independence from British imperialism.

At the present day, more than fifty years after the declaration of Independence, India and Pakistan are more enslaved to imperialism than in the days of the Raj. The domination of imperialism is not nowadays realised through direct military-bureaucratic rule, but through

the mechanism of the world market and the terms of trade, whereby more labour is exchanged for less. The enslavement is none the less for that. Fifty years later, the Indian and Pakistan bourgeoisies stand condemned before history. They have not realised a single one of the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. They have not solved the agrarian problem. They have not modernised society. They have not solved the national problem. The Indian bourgeoisie has not even been capable of abolishing that atrocious relic of barbarism, the caste system. Above all, they have not got real independence at all.

And now society must pay the price for the rottenness and incapacity of the bourgeoisie. What an irony! Gandhi, Nehru, and the other leaders of Congress regarded themselves as secular, even socialists. Now, fifty years later, the monstrous head of Hindu chauvinism and communalism is being raised in India. This is the revenge of history, its final verdict on decades of rule by Congress. And a similar situation exists in Pakistan, where the dark forces of Islamic fundamentalism are threatening to tear apart the fabric of society. These reactionaries, in claiming the unique right to "defend" their own religion and culture, in fact do irreparable damage to both. Yet a study of the history of Islam

shows that its greatest achievements were attained in periods of religious tolerance and freedom, whereas the so-called fundamentalists have caused nothing but harm to the Islamic world.

2) Philosophy of the Islamic world

The religion of Islam arose in the 7th century in Arabia, in the period of the transition of the Arab people from the primitive communal system to class society. It signified the unification of the Arabs in a common state (the Caliphate). The advent of Islam radically transformed the lives of millions of people. With its simple, levelling message, and its opposition to the

reactionary caste system (though not classes) it struck a responsive note especially among the poorest and most downtrodden layers of the population. In its origins, Islam represented a revolutionary movement and the awakening of the great Arab nation. One of Mohammed's last speeches ends with the following words: "Ye people! hearken to my speech and comprehend the same. Know that every Moslem is the brother of every other Moslem. All of you are of the same equality." (Quoted in A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, p. 270.)

Like all revolutionary movements in history, it also revealed itself as a

spiritual and intellectual awakening. Despite frequent attempts by later so-called fundamentalists to interpret Islam in a narrow and fanatical spirit that denies independent thought and cultural inquiry, in its early period, the Islamic revolution gave a powerful impulse to culture, art and philosophy. In his classic *Short History of the Saracens*, Ameer Ali Syed has this to say about Ali, the nephew of the Prophet and head of the first Arab Republic: "While Islam was ... extending its sway in distant parts, Ali was endeavouring in Medina to give an turn to the new-developed energy of the Saracen race. In the public mosque at Medina, Ali and his cousin Abdullah the son of Abbais, delivered lectures on

philosophy and logic, the traditions (history), rhetoric and law, whilst others dealt with other subjects. Thus was formed the nucleus of that intellectual movement which displayed itself in such great force in later times in Baghdad." (Ameer Ali Syed, *Short History of the Saracens*, p. 47.)

This was already the state of affairs in the 7th century. Contrary to the opinions of the modern fundamentalists, Islam, in its origins, was not equivalent to the worship of ignorance and narrow-minded fanaticism. In complete contrast to what passed for philosophy in the universities of medieval Europe, where it was utterly subservient to the Catholic

Church, Islamic philosophy was not a handmaid of theology. The formative period of Islamic philosophy dates from the late 8th century to the mid-9th century. Supported by the Caliphs, notably Ma'mun, it was known for its tolerance and freedom of scientific inquiry. Scholars from nations conquered by the Arabs were welcomed by state-endowed institutions. Free-ranging rationalist debate was encouraged. An important feature was the study of Greek texts in translation. At a time when Europe languished in the dark ages, the flame of culture and civilisation was kept shining brightly in the Islamic countries. Baghdad was the centre of a vast civilisation that extended

from Cordoba in Spain to India.

As early as 664 A.D. an Arab force reached as far as Afghanistan and took Kabul. About 717, the conquest of Sind was carried out. From here the Arabs turned south and captured Multan. By 1010 the western part of Punjab was subdued. In 1206 Kutb-ul-Din proclaimed himself sovereign of the whole of northern India at Delhi. During the next 120 years the invasion moved steadily south. In the 15th century, the Moslem rule in India was split up into a number of petty states. Finally, these were united into a mighty empire under the Moghul emperor Akbar and his successors. A.C. Bouquet writes:

"Akbar was tolerant of Hinduism, and tried to establish an eclectic religion, including elements from all the other faiths recognised in his realm." (A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, p. 138.)

This was a truly universal civilisation. Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina (known in the West by his Latin name Avicenna), who lived in Central Asia, in the important university town of Bokhara, was not only a philosopher but also a physician and natural scientist who, although faithful to Islam, did much to spread the knowledge of the scientific and philosophical knowledge of Greek antiquity throughout the Arab world, and

thence to Europe, which, for all its fear of Islam, looked to the Arabs as a source of knowledge and education. There were many other great thinkers, like Al-Farabi (flourished 9th-10th centuries), the author of the first works of political philosophy within the context of the religion of Islam (*The Attainment of Happiness and The Political Regime*). Ibn Sina and others like him helped to consolidate rationalist thinking and propagate natural science and mathematics, both fields in which the Arabs made great discoveries.

Spain and the Arabs

The conquest of Spain which began in

711 A.D. marked a turning-point in world history. The Arabs who made the first incursions from North Africa had only intended to make a plundering raid, but the inner rottenness of the Visigoth kingdom led to its speedy collapse. The Arabs -or Moors as the Spaniards called them- conquered almost the whole Peninsular and advanced deep into France. The speed of the conquest was mainly because the oppressed Spanish masses rallied to the invaders, who certainly treated them better than their fellow Christian landlords.

The conquest of Spain had the character of a social-revolutionary war, which has been compared to the French revolution.

The Arabs appeared before the Spanish serfs as social emancipators, not foreign conquerors. They abolished the oppressive rights of the possessing classes -the feudal landlords and clergy-, and replaced the crushing burden of taxes by a single tax which, as well as being relatively light, was not levied on women, children, the sick, the blind, beggars or slaves. Even the Christian monasteries were exempt. Most Spanish cities were granted favourable terms which were honourably kept by the conquerors. The only land that was confiscated was that of the nobles and clergy who had fled to join the enemy (the demand of the confiscation of the property of counterrevolutionary

émigrés was later included by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.)

In essence, Islam contains a democratic and levelling idea which asserts the equality of all men, irrespective of race or colour. This was remarkably advanced for the period under consideration. Far from persecuting other faiths, the Arabs in Spain were far more tolerant than the Christians either before or after Arab rule. They protected all religions and immediately allowed the persecuted Jews to worship freely. Let us recall that the Spanish Inquisition later brutally expelled the Jews from Spain. Like the Mogul rulers of India, they encouraged intermarriage between

the conquerors and the conquered in order to bring about the fusion of the two peoples. They advanced agriculture and created the architectural wonders of Granada, Cordoba and Seville. No wonder a large part of the Spanish population became converts to Islam, and demonstrated their loyalty by fighting to defend their homeland and freedoms against the armies of Christian-feudal reaction in the North.

W.C. Atkinson describes the impact of Islamic culture on the minds of the Spaniards in the words of the famous lament of Alvaro of Cordoba: "Alas, all the Christian youths who become famous for their talent know only the language

and the literature of the Arabs; they read and study zealously Arabic books, of which by dint of great expenditure they form extensive libraries, and proclaim aloud on all sides that this literature is worthy of admiration." (From W.C. Anderson, *A History of Spain and Portugal*, p. 60.)

The same author outlines the economic advance achieved by the Arabs in Spain: "Irrigation works, of which traces still survive today, made fertile wide areas of irregular or inadequate rainfall; rice, the sugar-cane, and other exotic crops were introduced; and although the Koran forbade the drinking of wine, the vine was cultivated on a large scale.

"Industry enjoyed a parallel prosperity, that ranged through gold and silver mining, the weaving of wool and silk, the manufacture of paper, introduced into Europe by the Arabs, and of glass, invented in Cordoba in the ninth century, metalwork, ceramics, and leatherware. The fame of these products travelled far, and to handle the flourishing commerce that resulted there grew up a great trading fleet based chiefly in Seville, Malaga, and Almeria." (Ibid., p. 58.)

Thus began a period of economic and social advance that lasted for centuries, and with it a brilliant chapter in the history of human culture, art and science. One commentator writes: "The Moors

organised that wonderful kingdom of Cordova, which was the marvel of the Middle Ages, and, when all Europe was plunged in barbaric ignorance and strife, alone held the torch of learning and civilisation bright and shining before the Western world." (Quoted in Ameer Ali Syed, *Short History of the Saracens*, p. 115.)

Anyone who today visits the Alhambra in Granada or the Mosque at Cordoba will instantly understand that the Arabs of Spain were far in advance of medieval Europe, which they excelled, not only in science and technology, but also in the fine arts, sculpture and painting. The Arabs' cultural tradition

was broad: it included the study of logic, the sciences of nature (including psychology and biology), the mathematical sciences (including music and astronomy), metaphysics, ethics, and politics. No town, however small, was without a school or collage, while every principal town had its own university, including Cordoba (renowned throughout Europe), Seville (Ishbilia), Malaga, Zaragoza, Lisbon (Alishbuna), Jaen and Salamanca, which subsequently became the most prestigious of all Spanish universities. There were a galaxy of writers, poets, historians and philosophers.

Contrary to what one might expect, there

were many famous women intellectuals. At a time when the notion of the equality of women would have been anathema in Christian Europe, many distinguished poetesses and cultured ladies were held in esteem in Cordoba and Granada. Hassana at-Tamimiyeh, daughter of Abu'l Hussain the poet, and Umm ul-Ula, both natives of Guadalajara, flourished in the 6th century of the Hegira. Ammat ul-Aziz (a descendant of the Prophet, and therefore styled ash-Sharifa) and al-Ghusanieh, from the province of Almeria, were both women who were in the front rank of scholars at the time. There were many others. Mariam, daughter of Abu Yakub al-Ansari, was a native of Seville, where she taught

rhetoric, poetry and literature, "which, joined to her piety, her good morals, her virtues, and amiable disposition, gained her the affection of her sex and gave her many pupils." (Ameer Ali Syed, op. cit., p. 578.)

Backward Europe and advanced Asia

So far from Islamic thought being limited to mysticism and religious fanaticism, it showed a natural inclination to rationalism and science, in which for centuries the Arabs led the world. Great advances were made especially in mathematics and astronomy, but also in many other spheres of science and technology. This point is made by Alfred

Hooper in his history of mathematics:

"We have much for which to thank the Moors. They introduced new ideas about medicine and medical knowledge; they taught improved methods of working in metal and leather; they built waterworks, sluices and canals in Spain; in all, they brought the wisdom of India and the East to a Europe which had sunk back into ignorance and savage ways.

"The Arabs were familiar with the work of the great Greek mathematicians who had built up the 'Golden age of Greek mathematics' before the fragile and wonderful civilisation of Greece was absorbed by the intensely practical and

utilitarian Romans; *they also introduced into Spain the new and revolutionary method of writing numbers that they had learned from the Hindus*, a method that was to pave the way for our modern world of science and engineering and mathematics." Alfred Hooper, *Makers of Mathematics*, p. 24.)

Throughout the Middle Ages the only real advances in mathematics were made by the Indians and Arabs. It was they who discovered trigonometry. It was the Arabs who discovered algebra. The very word is Arabic *-al-jabr-* which, like so many other things, found its way into Europe from Spain. The Arab mathematician al-Khowarizmi, as well

as writing a book on Hindu-Arab number systems (the Indians also played a vital role in developing mathematics, and the Arabs learned from them), wrote another book on the treatment of equations which he called *al jabr w'al muquabalah*, "the reunion and the opposition". This was later translated into Latin and hence became accessible to Europeans.

Alfred Hooper comments: "The years from about 800 to about 1450, known as the Middle Ages, were marked by an almost complete stagnation of independent thought, which paralysed mathematical progress and cast its gloom over European mathematicians as

over all other thinkers." (A. Hooper, op. cit., p. 84.)

The same author adds: "Centuries after the Arabs had introduced the new number-symbols into Europe many people still clung to the old familiar Roman numerals and would have nothing to do with the new system, which they associated with traders and heathens. By the 13th century, however, the new system of writing numbers had become established in many parts of Europe. *It was not until then that any real development in the number-reckoning we now call elementary arithmetic could take place.*" (Ibid., p. 26, my emphasis.)

The Medieval world gained access to the ideas of Aristotle and Plato mainly from Arab sources. Out of a host of brilliant thinkers who influenced medieval Europe, a special mention must be made of Ibn Roshd Muhammed - known in the West by his Latin name Averroës. This great Arab philosopher lived between 1126 and 1198 in Spain during the Caliphate of Cordoba. In his writings, we see the elements of a materialist philosophy, derived from a careful reading of Aristotle. Although he remained a devout Moslem, Ibn Roshd attempted to prove that matter and motion could neither be created nor destroyed, thus anticipating the conservation theories of modern physics.

He likewise denied the immortality of the soul. So radical were these ideas, that his theories were persecuted by orthodox Moslems. But through the work of this great philosopher, particularly his commentaries on Aristotle, Europeans became acquainted with the long-forgotten world of classical Greek philosophy.

The main fountainhead of this knowledge was Islamic Spain, which, until it was destroyed by the Christians, was a flourishing, prosperous and cultured nation. Granada, Seville and Cordoba were important and internationally renowned centres of learning. All religions were treated with enlightened

tolerance, until the Spaniards led by those narrow-minded and fanatical bigots Fernando of Castille and Isabelle of Aragon set about reducing the flower of Al-Andalus to a heap of bloody ashes. It is ironic that, to this day, Europeans still see themselves as the exclusive bearers of human culture when for the whole of the Middle Ages they acted as the grave-diggers of culture in the East.

The so-called Crusades about which so much romantic rubbish has been written were just so many destructive and bloodthirsty raids of barbarians against people who were, in every respect, their superiors. One of the Christian chroniclers of the siege of Granada,

Father Agapito, writes in contemptuous terms about the Arab habit of washing themselves: "Water is more necessary to these infidels than bread; as they make use of it in repeated daily ablutions, and employ it in baths, and in a thousand other idle and extravagant modes, of which we Spaniards and Christians make but little account." (See W. Irving, *The Conquest of Granada*, p. 251.)

The reactionary and barbarous nature of the Crusades has been sufficiently demonstrated by modern historians like Stephen Runciman. Here is a typical extract by another writer: "In each captured city the Tafurs [poor crusaders] looted everything they could lay their

hands on, raped the Moslem women and carried out indiscriminate massacres. The official leaders of the Crusade had no authority over them at all. When the Emir of Antioch protested about the cannibalism of the Tafurs, the princes could only admit apologetically: 'All of us together cannot tame King Tafur'." (N. Cohen, *In Search of the Millennium*, pp. 66-7.)

And again: "The fall of Jerusalem was followed by a great massacre; except for the governor and his bodyguard, every Moslem -man, woman and child- was killed. In and around the Temple of Solomon 'the horses waded in blood up to their knees, nay up to the bridle. It

was a just and wonderful judgement of God that the same place should receive the blood of those whose blasphemies it had so long carried up to God.' As for the Jews of Jerusalem, they took refuge in their chief synagogue and they were all burnt alive. Weeping with joy and singing songs of praise the crusaders marched in procession to the church of the Holy Sepulchre. 'Oh new day, new day and exultation, new and everlasting gladness... That day, famed through all centuries to come, turned all our sufferings and hardships into joy and exultation; that day, the confirmation of Christianity, the annihilation of paganism, the renewal of our faith!'" (Ibid., p. 68.)

Reactionary trends in Islam

The development of Islamic culture, however, did not proceed in a straight line, any more than any other. From the beginning there were conflicting tendencies. There was a reactionary strand. Islam, after all, was born as a religion of conquest. The notion of hostility to infidels (gyawurs), the inferiority of women, and the justification of social inequality, were also present -although at that time, no more than among the Christians. Like all religions, Islam is open to a narrow and fanatical interpretation (fundamentalism). At times, there were periods of reaction, which curtailed the

advance of rationalist thought and scientific discovery. The destruction of the great Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols in the 13th century set the whole process back and prepared the way for one of the periodic outbursts of Islamic fundamentalism. Ibn Taymiyya called for believers to rid Islam of all innovations. This is the expression, not of the advance of Islam, but of internal crisis, division and decline. This fundamentalist reaction was a disaster for the development of thought and culture in the Arab world. For a time, the flame passed to Iran.

In the 16th century, the Shi'ite scholars were identified with a philosophy of

enlightenment which even found a political expression. As a result new scientific and philosophical advances were made possible. The great period of revival came in the 16th and 17th centuries in Iran under the Safavid dynasty, which established the Shiite brand of Islam as the official state religion, primarily as a defence against the Sunni Ottoman empire. The Safavids provided artists and intellectuals with well-endowed institutions and a liberal atmosphere in which to carry on their work. As in every other period where Islamic scholars have been allowed freedom to live and breathe, brilliant results were achieved by thinkers such as Mir Damad and his pupil Molla

Sadra and other luminaries of the school of Isfahan.

All this is sufficient to disprove the Western prejudice that the East in general, and the Islamic world in particular, has produced nothing of note in the field of philosophy. In those periods where Islamic scholars were permitted the freedom to develop, they have proved more than equal to the best that the West has produced. But where Islam has been interpreted in a narrow and fanatical spirit, great harm has been done. The intellectual, resenting the onerous restrictions placed upon him, has reacted against the authority of a religion that appears to be the negation

of culture and freedom. Thus, there is an anti-religious strain in Islamic poetry.

As the following examples show. In the 17th century Dara Shikoh wrote:

"Heaven is where the Muslim priests do not reside and the people do not follow his edicts. In the city where the Muslim priests reside, wise men are never to be found." (Dara Shikoh, 1615-1659.)

Almost a century later the Sufi poet Sachai Sarmast complained bitterly: "It is religion itself which has misled the people of the nation as well as the Sheikhs and peers (the priests) who have gruesomely misled the people. While one is a supplicant in the mosque, the other kneels before a temple. But neither

of them is any closer to love of humanity." (Sachal Sarmast, 1731-1829.)

Today the rise of fundamentalism has once again cast a dark shadow over the development of Islamic culture. The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan, supported by the guns and money of Christian America, represents the ultimate triumph of barbarism and the blackest obscurantism that conceals its nakedness behind a religious fig-leaf. Today it is hard to gaze upon the smouldering heap of rubble that once was Kabul and remember that this was once one of the great centres of the culture of Islam in Central Asia. For any

person with the slightest knowledge of the history of this culture, the descent into barbarism is all the more painful.

Of one thing we can be sure. Only socialism can provide the antidote to this disease. The peoples of the East, who gave the world such glorious proof of their intellectual and artistic vitality, will not forever be content to slumber in chains of material misery and cultural poverty. And when the day finally dawns when they put an end to capitalist slavery and transform society on socialist lines, they will take a giant broom in their hands, and they will sweep society clean of all the accumulated rubbish of ignorance,

obscurantism and communal savagery. The socialist reconstruction of society must be carried out from top to bottom. And when this great work is finally accomplished, they will create such wonders of creation that they will put in the shade all the marvels of Granada and Cordoba. Then the peoples will rediscover their true heritage and tradition, and recover all their lost dignity and pride in themselves. The old will be created anew and placed on an infinitely higher level for the enjoyment and fulfilment of future generations.